

5) FIT FOR THE FUTURE - PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF MERGER PROPOSAL

Introduction

At its 16 March 2015 meeting Council resolved to allocate the necessary resources to fully investigate the potential for a merger with Harden Shire Council in order to make an informed determination at the June 2015 meeting whether to submit a Council Merger Proposal.

This resolution came about after the two preliminary meetings (8/8/14 & 16/2/15) between the full Council's and senior staff of both Cootamundra and Harden

Consequent to the 16 March 2016 resolution, Council held a further meeting with Harden Councillors and senior staff on 14 April 2015, at which a full presentation was given by staff indicating all of the potential gains and pitfalls of a merger. This resulted in Council holding an Extraordinary Meeting on 6 May 2015, at which Council resolved to '*exhibit its merger proposal from 11 May 2015 until 5 June 2015*', in order to fulfil the statutory requirement included in the Fit for the Future merger proposal template.

Discussion

Prior to the official period of consultation Council released a variety of media statements indicating that a merger with Harden was being investigated. These elicited a general response in favour of the investigation and merger proposal and did not result in a single piece of correspondence opposing the proposed Harden merger.

From 11 May Council had an information brochure delivered to every household, postal address and absentee landholder by Australia Post. This brochure was also posted on Council's website with a response section. The brochure included a tear off reply paid post section which Council encouraged all residents to return with comments. The result of these two feedback mechanisms was a return of 176 comments, 157 in favour of the proposed merger and 19 opposed.

During the period of consultation Council held four public meetings:

18 May 15	Cootamundra Town Hall	71 in attendance (excluding councillors and staff)
19 May 15	Wallendbeen Hall	9 in attendance (excluding councillors and staff)
20 May 15	Stockinbingal Hall	29 in attendance (excluding councillors and staff)
23 May 15	Stephen Ward Rooms, Cootamundra	20 in attendance (excluding councillors and staff)

The predominant feeling of all four meetings was that Council should proceed with the proposed Harden merger and that the merger would be in the best interest of both communities. There were three vocal dissenters (two Cootamundra, one

Stockinbingal) from this view based on previous experience of forced amalgamations in other areas. There was one vocal dissenter (Cootamundra) advocating a merge with Young. These views were tested by a show of hands with the overwhelming majority indicating that the proposed merger should be pursued.

Harden Shire undertook a similar parallel consultation including four public meetings, brochure and website. This resulted in the same predominantly positive indication from all four meetings and in the return of 335 written comments, 304 in favour of the proposed merger and 31 opposed (excluding councillors and staff). Some concern (15 submissions) was raised regarding the effect that a Harden Cootamundra merger may have on the 'Hilltops' agricultural region, on the false assumption that the new Council would not continue to market the 'Hilltops' agricultural region. The new Council, as did Harden previously, will contain a large portion of the 'Hilltops' agricultural area and will, as did Harden previously, continue to support the marketing of regional produce under the 'Hilltops' banner.

The major issues raised in the submissions received by both councils are summarised below.

Survey Results, by Theme	In Favour	Against	Total
Capacity	11	10	21
Communities	18		18
Compatibility	22	2	24
Forced Amalgamation	9		9
Hilltops Proposal	53	15	68
Improved Services	11		11
Jobs	7	2	9
Name suggestion	26	1	27
Other comment or Nil comment	263	14	277
Other merger options	15	5	20
Rates	5	1	6
Council representation	8		8
Villages	6		6
TOTALS	454	50	504

Both Cootamundra and Harden had copies of the draft Business Plan on their Council websites, along with a "Fit for the Future" web page which also included a copy of all relevant media releases, the informational brochure, the PowerPoints used during consultation, all previous Council reports and minutes. The Business Plan was also on exhibition in both council's offices and libraries, and Harden also included a copy of the 'Hilltops' business plan it had had prepared with Young and Boorowa as an alternative merger proposal.

The overall outcome of all consultation undertaken was an overwhelming acceptance of the Harden Cootamundra merger proposal, and an overwhelming message that both councils should submit this proposal for the long term benefit of both communities.

Template 1 and the Harden Cootamundra Merger Business Plan form **SEPARATE TABLED DOCUMENT A JUNE 2015**. All of the remaining public documents to be submitted with the proposed merger Template 1 will be available on Council's website <http://www.cootamundra.nsw.gov.au/council/fit-for-the-future.aspx> .

RECOMMENDATION

That Council submit the Harden Cootamundra merger proposal.

08/06/15 RESOLVED – Moved: Braybrooks Seconded: Phillips

That Council submit the Harden Cootamundra merger proposal.

Councillors requested that the unanimous vote for this motion be recorded.

**MINUTES OF THE ORDINARY MEETING OF THE HARDEN SHIRE
COUNCIL HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 17th JUNE, 2015 IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBERS COMMENCING AT 5.03 PM.**

**5.6 FIT FOR FUTURE – HARDEN COOTAMUNDRA
MERGER**

107/06/15 **Resolved** on the motion of Councillors Reid and Manchester that:

1. Council note the outcome from the public exhibition of the Harden Cootamundra merger proposal indicating a clear 90% support for the proposal.
2. In consideration of the community support for the Harden Cootamundra merger proposal Council endorse the joint submission, with Cootamundra Council, of a merger template and supporting Merged Council Business Plan to the Office of Local Government.
3. Council delegate authority to the Mayor and Acting General Manager to execute the merger template and lodge the merger template and Merged Council Business Plan with the Office of Local Government before the due date of 30 June 2015.
4. Council incorporate in the merger Business Plan a request for further funding of \$5M from the NSW Government in order for Council to reduce the merged Councils infrastructure backlog.

The above recommendation was carried unanimously.